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### **Pubs in the Czech Republic: Simply a Gentleman's Business**

The pub in the Czech Republic has a distinct role. It lays a foundation for the character of Czech society. The pub, “hospoda,” is the most basic Czech drinking establishment that carries along with it an abundant history. The establishment of pubs in the Czech Republic dates back to the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries (Vinopal 3). The pubs, however, had to await their popularity until the Czech National Revival of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when pubs became a place and center for the emerging societal recovery predominantly initiated by men. It was a place where men of all social classes kept the Czech language alive through social interactions with one other.

Today, there are more than 800 pubs in the capital city of Prague (Kapicka). This wide selection of pubs remains a central part of the Czech national heritage, mainly because the modern pub still retains its historical and societal functions. Central to leisure time, the pub is a fairly casual place overwhelmingly dominated by men (Hall 69). It is often the case that Czech men find themselves escaping their day to day troubles by having a cold half liter glass of beer and socializing with their male cohorts.

Pubs are viewed as a cultural and historical phenomenon, and as such, many respect its symbolic function as a support system for Czech social life. In reality, there are two major perspectives on the role of the pub in Czech culture: one is positive and the other negative. Men tend to perceive the function of the pub positively as a place where they are able to socialize with friends, relax, and escape from their problems by discussing a variety of topics ranging from women to sports and politics. At the same

time, women and those who do not visit pubs, tend to view the pub as a negative social gathering place because it is full of smoke, slot machines, and alcoholics, thus chipping away at family life. This polarized view of the pub results in a gender rift. This is popularly reflected in Czech literature and the national media. Furthermore, the space of the pub is perceived in Czech society as a male dominated social place due to the physical nature of the pub. The role of the pub as a gendered space will be examined in this paper as a reflection of the physical composition of the pub, men's role within that space, and women's perception of the internally rugged "life of the pub."

The personnel and the customers of the pub, along with their behavior and interrelations, determine the physical representation of the "pub scene". The male tendency to control space and marked territories takes on a larger role. Regular customers often are given a special authority in the pub: they have their own designated chairs, tables, and bar stools (Vinopal 14). Due to the special authority granted to the "regulars" of the pub, many blue-collar workers are given a chance to climb the social ladder by achieving such status. Some of these "regulars" even carve out their names into chairs, place pictures of themselves on the wall, and map out seating arrangements on posters (Vinopal 9). Having designated chairs and/or seating arrangements allows men to retain control over a specific area.

The more often the "regulars" frequent the pub, the more likely they are to establish a relationship with the taverner and therefore be allowed to sit closer to the bar. If tourists come to the pub, they usually sit toward the back, and if they happen to sit down closer to the front, the taverner may suggest that they sit in the back as a courtesy to his "regular customers." In addition to the special authority granted to regulars, another

reason for the seating arrangement is the notion that tourists usually pay directly for the beer they order, as opposed to the “regulars” who have their beer put on tab. Having the regulars sit closer allows the taverner to have better control over how much they drink and how much money they owe. It also makes it easier for him to demand that they pay their tab.

The physical arrangement of the furniture inside the Czech pub encourages social interaction and also reflects egalitarian attitudes that are typical of Czech culture. A classic Czech pub has long tables with benches along the two sides rather than smaller separate tables with chairs. Special importance is drawn to the arrangement of the benches and tables for several reasons. One is that whoever comes to the pub is invited to sit and converse in any open space along the bench, which creates a sense of equality among that table. Second, the arrangement of the pub space is practical in that when the capacity of the pub appears to be reached, the taverner does not have to worry about where to seat additional customers, because the other customers themselves create a space for the new ones. Third, reservations do not exist in the pub, because it is inherent that a seat will always be created when it is needed. As Timothy Hall notes, due to the placement of tables and the special seating arrangements with an empty seat always available to all, the Czech pub world reflects both Czech pragmatism as well as sense of openness among Czechs (Hall 70). The seating etiquette of a Czech pub creates a sense of informality that also contributes to the social functions of the pub as a place of discussion for men. Not separated by small tables, men are more likely to have group discussions when sitting closely together. The layout of tables and benches enhances male interaction

and allows men to debate all kinds of topics at greater length. In this manner, the physical layout of the pub influences men's behavior and their interactions.

The pub is also viewed as a gendered place of escape, a notion that is deeply embedded in many Czech cultural attitudes. In Bohumil Hrabal's Morytáty a legendy, a male character exclaims: "Waiter, this pub of yours, it's not a dive, it's the Bethlehem Chapel, in which every guest becomes, in the course of the conversation, what he used to be, or what he would like to be. Waiter, this pub of yours is a loud and deafening solitude, in which one dreams best of all (Cravens 76)." The quote above evinces that the pub is a place of escape. When men go to a pub they are able to converse more freely than elsewhere, sharing emotions that they would not share anywhere else or even with close family members. Before the fall of communism in 1989, Czech pubs were a popular destination because it was the only place where people, predominantly men, could find out what was really happening in politics. Safely nestled in this space of "escape," these men were not belabored by propaganda and politically charged language.

Since 1989, pubs have changed dramatically. However, they still remain a center where men are able to talk about women, sports, work, politics, and their individual troubles. The main reason for the absence of women in the pub is not solely due to alcoholic beverages, because, after all, there are women who do enjoy the taste of beer. Rather it is the ethos and social interaction of Czech pub culture. In an article by Eric Martin, a university student Vít Střítecký was asked why pubs are so important in the Czech culture. He responded, "I think the reason is really to meet people and to talk, and the beer is not really that important in that case" (Martin). This intra-personal view of the young university student is reflected in the data in Table 1, which shows the percentage

of people who agree with statements commonly asserted about pubs. The two statements that received the most agreement from the respondents were the phrases that stated, 1) “matters that are usually discussed within the pub space are about assisting neighbors, negotiations, and small jobs on the side;” 2) “people usually go to a pub in order to relax and escape from everyday worries.”

Although, the pub is a public place that is open to anyone who wishes to go there, there is an underlying notion that the pub is not an appealing place for women. This changes the pub into a space that is considered private. When Czech women gossip, they tend to feel more comfortable talking about others only in the confidentiality of their own or their friend’s home. The opposite is generally true for men. Men also gossip, but their opportunity to do so derives from the perceived privacy of the pub. In the enclosed space of their own homes, men do not tend to gossip with one another; however, when they enter the pub, they express their opinions about others very freely. Men in the pub create a new sort of community for themselves where they feel confident, safe, and, most importantly, they are convinced that they have a sense of belonging somewhere. This phenomenon is noted in an article by Eric Martin which states that, “the information function of Czech pubs is very important for Czech Republic. People go there because they think that they are able to get something that they are not able to get anywhere - some piece of information that they are able to get only at the platform of Czech pubs (Martin).” This “seeking of information” parallels the gossiping of women at home, thus creating a safe space for men to share their views. However, “male gossip” does not have the negative connotation of its female-related counterpart. When gossiping in a local pub,

men are never labeled as “drbny” (rumormongers). This term is reserved solely for women.

Czech literature supports the view of men going to pubs for conversation yet not being labeled as rumormongers. One of the most famous Czech novels, The Fateful Adventures of the Good Soldier Švejk During the World War, illustrates just that: in chapter one, Švejk finds out from Mrs. Mullerová, his landlady, that Archduke Ferdinand has been assassinated. As soon as he finds this out, he runs to the local pub and talks to Mr. Bretschneider, not suspecting that Bretschneider works for the state police. In fact, Bretschneider went specifically to the pub because he knew that the pub was a place where Czech men speak more freely and openly than elsewhere. True to his expectations, Švejk immediately begins to speak about politics, even though Bretschneider is a complete stranger to him. The story of Švejk highlights some important points about the role of pubs in Czech culture. First, after finding out some new information, Švejk goes immediately to the pub to share his “gossip”. Since the pub is a place that is usually associated with friends and camaraderie, Švejk talks about all of his opinions to the police officer, as he were talking to a friend in a pub setting. Švejk is unaware that Bretschneider is manipulating this important aspect of Czech culture

Another fitting example is Jan Neruda’s “Pán Ryšánek a pán Schlegl”, which also highlights cultural stereotypes regarding men’s behavior and the camaraderie aspect found in Czech pubs. The two men, Mr. Ryšánek and Mr. Schlegl, regularly frequent the pub at six o’clock each evening. As regulars, each has his own table where no one else can sit. However, due to a conflict over a woman many years before, Mr. Ryšánek and Mr. Schlegl never exchange any words with one other. One day Mr. Ryšánek falls ill and

does not show up. The routine of the men's quiet rivalry is interrupted. Once Ryšánek recovers, the men break their silence and begin to converse. In the end, both realize how essential they are to one another (Neruda 83-92). The story focuses on the behavior of the regular pub customers. No one would dare to sit at Mr. Ryšánek and Mr. Schlegl's table when there was an empty space caused by Mr. Ryšánek's illness. This demonstrates the respect granted to regulars at a Czech pub.

Since the Czech pub atmosphere is primarily dominated by drinking in smoke-filled rooms with stained table cloths and surly servers, men are the target population (Kapicka). As is shown in Table 2, only 6% of women enjoy pubs as a place for socialization, while 40% of men think of pubs as their preferred social spot. Thirty percent of women prefer not to go anywhere, staying instead in the comfort and safety of their own home (see Table 2). Women tend to view the space of the pub rather negatively: they typically view the pub as an unfriendly space because it takes away from family life, has an unsafe environment, and does not cater to the female population.

Not only is the typical pub dirty, full of smoke, but most importantly it is a place where men usually yell at each other or talk in a very loud voice, which prevents women from conversing. The major reason for the small female population at pubs is due to the pub's physical space. Because pubs have either benches with long tables or bar stools, women do not find it easy to carry on conversation with one another. In addition, while it may seem natural for a man to sit next to a stranger in a pub, a woman might feel reluctant to do so because she would feel uncomfortable in such a setting. Also, she would not be invited to participate in the conversation at the table, because in the male dominated space of the pub, her perspective may not be taken as seriously. Furthermore,

the unappealing image of pubs for women is usually blamed on the pub as a place where most men smoke. Kapicka notes that smoking is permitted in all pubs and that some include both smoking and non-smoking sections. Even though the option of a non-smoking table is available, it still does not solve the problem of people smelling like cigarettes and alcohol after leaving the pub. This is especially important for Czech women, because in Czech society it is not considered proper for a woman to smell in such a way (Kapicka).

Not only are pubs unappealing for their atmosphere, they also serve food that is typically considered masculine, so-called “beer foods”: *nakládaný hermelín* (a brie type cheese marinated in oil with onions, bay leaves, and allspice), *utopenci* (literally translated as “drowners”/ small sausages marinated in vinegar with onions and spices), and *sekaná* (meatloaf cut in thick strips). All of these foods are very heavy, and they leave people with unpleasant breath that is hard to get rid of (Hall 69). Therefore women tend not to favor these foods. Even if some women do enjoy these foods, they might classify them as their “guilty pleasures” because entering into a pub and ordering a “drowner” is not considered socially appropriate for women.

A majority of women do not like that their husbands go to pubs because when they go, it enables the husband to drink beer and forget about his family commitments (Vinopal 15). Many women feel bitter toward the pubs because they feel that the pubs distract attention from them and from their families. This opinion was humorously illustrated by a Czech television show from the late 1990s, *Hospoda (The Pub)*. In one episode, a mother sends her son to get her husband out of the pub and bring him back to the family (Flamendr). It is interesting to note that the mother sends her son, rather than

going to the pub herself or sending a daughter, when she wants her husband to come home. This further demonstrates how unattractive the pub atmosphere is for many women.

Today more women venture out into pubs than in the past, mainly as part of bigger groups that include friends from high school or college. Still, a majority of women prefer going to a café, restaurant, or pizzeria because they provide a more welcoming environment. Naděžda Horáková from Public Opinion Research Centre (Centrum pro výzkum veřejného mínění, CVVM) explains, “the pub is more of a male environment, even though it is not surprising when you do see a woman there. Most women still are more sensitive to the cigarette smoke or dirtiness of the pub and therefore they seek different places to socialize” (Kamarádi i odpočinek).

In conclusion, what brings men to the pub is the sense of community and belonging they feel which differs significantly from the community that a man has at home. Although the pub is a public space, paradoxically, it would seem, Czech men have transformed it into a private space. As such, men transform the pub into their own physical and psychological space. This transformation of space enables them to freely express their opinions and views about politics.

Pubs in the Czech Republic have strong ties to the country’s history and societal functions. Subconsciously functioning as a gendered space, pubs provide and establish a differentiating environment for men and women. While women tend to view the space of the pub negatively, men, on the other hand, perceive the pub as a social gathering place that serves a positive function. This separation by gender prevails even today and will most likely continue into the future.

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### Additional Supporting Materials

*\*All materials that were provided in the Czech language were translated by the author of this paper, who is a Czech native speaker\**

Table 1: Function of pubs in society today- agreement with given statements

Matters that are usually discussed within the pub space are about assisting neighbors, negotiations and small jobs on the side	85
People usually go to a pub in order to relax and escape from everyday worries	83
Pubs are an important aspect of Czech culture and tradition	76
Pub is a place where one can find out about news and information to which he otherwise does not have access	74
Pub is an important place to meet your friends, acquaintances, colleagues, etc.	73
Pubs are likely to organize cultural and social gatherings- festivities, balls, meetings, lectures, etc.	65
Pubs are the most important place to meet people, make connections and have social contact with others	63
Pubs divert parents from their families	57
One of the main causes of alcoholism is going to pubs	53
People go to pubs in order to get drunk, so they could forget about the things that are happening around them	47
Pub is one of the few places where one can talk about politics	42
Going to pubs is for most people practically the only source of fun	33

\* The values show the percentage of people that have indicated their agreement with the statement as “strongly agree” or “agree”. The recalculation to 100% in each given statement is made up of answers that “strongly disagree”, “disagree” or “don’t know, cannot decide”.

Source: Public Opinion Research Centre (Centrum pro výzkum veřejného mínění, CVVM), published October 11, 2004. Processed by Jiří Vinopal. Translated by Johana Fiserova

Table 2: Favorite type of a social gathering destination in accordance with gender (in %)

	Men	Women	Men + Women
Bar	4	2	3
Restaurant	24	17	20
Café	2	12	7
Pub, tavern	40	6	22
Teahouse	0	4	2
Wine room	3	4	4
Patisserie	1	8	5
Pizzeria, Chinese restaurant, etc	5	11	8
Other types	1	2	2
Never goes out	16	30	23
Don't know, cannot decide	4	4	4
Total	100	100	100

Source: Public Opinion Research Centre (Centrum pro výzkum veřejného mínění, CVVM), published October 11, 2004, processed by Naděžda Horáková, Translated by Johana Fiserova

Sketch of a pub from the television show *Hospoda (The Pub)*